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*Lovers' Lane  
at Breeze Hill,  
1930*

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## ROCK-GARDENING AT BREEZE HILL

### I

THERE are seven rock-gardens at Breeze Hill! This is not quite as ridiculous as it seems. They are all small, either placed in widely different surroundings, or used for purposes other than just cultivating rock-plants.

The charm of rock-gardening grew upon us slowly at first, but rather more rapidly as we began to succeed here and there in a small way. It was in 1927 that the first rocks were put into the end of a long perennial border to keep it from washing into the path. Nothing very exciting was planted in this little rockery, which consisted of only a half-dozen rows of squarish stones sunk in the ground behind each other, each row a little higher than the one in front, in order to hold back the soil. A few plants of *Arenaria montana*, *Campanula carpatica*, *Dianthus deltoides*, and one of the many misnamed sedums which abound in these United States, were stuck in the crevices, with some mossy saxifrages raised from seed, a couple of *Aster Amellus*, some bulbs of *Crocus zonatus*, and several other things whose lives were so brief that we have lost track of them. The saxifrages bloomed beautifully the next year, but then

departed. As may be expected, *arenaria*, *campanula*, and *dianthus* succeeded beyond our fondest hopes.

The growth of these plants demonstrated that our rock-garden space was much too small if we hoped to grow more than one kind of rock-garden plant in it. Consequently, the first attempt was abandoned as a garden feature, but served ever after as a quarry from which to obtain sedums, *dianthus*es, and *campanulas*. For any vacancy in the garden which can be filled with one of them, we have plenty available in this old rockery, now completely hidden under their wide-spread mantle.

## II

The next year we were able to apply the lessons which we learned in 1927, but in the meantime two other rock-adventures were undertaken. In the Front Garden, under the shade of an *ailanthus* and several Norway maples, was a patch of ground with a curved stone-flagged walk through the middle, which, for some reason or other, in the earlier years of the garden, had been dubbed "Lovers' Lane," although it had no winding turns, no romantic brooks, benches, or other appurtenances to warrant it. The Boss insists that the name was in-



The first Breeze Hill Rock-Garden, 1927

herited, in 1909, with the place, and that "Lovers' Lane," as it then existed, constituted a narrow carriage approach. This being abandoned, he disregarded the insistence of his friend, Warren H. Manning, the distinguished landscape architect, who cast a capable eye over Breeze Hill before it was habitable, and did not cut out the ailanthus and the two Norway maples. Believing *Rhododendron maximum* would flourish here, he planted almost a carload of collected clumps under the maples and beyond, making an attempt to bar out the trees by a slate crib on one side and a concrete box on the other. But such obstructions only delayed the destruction of the rhododendrons a little while—the maple roots went both over and under them with cheerful vigor. Then came opposition plantings of "hard-luck" shrubs, such as the Regel privet, *Sorbaria arborea*, and *Rubus odoratus*, and these persisted. But it was a barren and sterile place, drained dry by the thirsty roots of maples and ailanthus, cruelly swept by north winds in winter, and almost bare as a desert. It had been intended as a haven for native wild flowers, but continual winter winds and the gardeners' over-zealous rakes removed all vestiges of woodland mulch which the native wild flowers demand. Only the common violet endured among the many white lilac suckers surrounding two great plants at the end of the lane. Later, *Eupatorium urticæfolium* (*ageratoides*) seeded its millions everywhere.

The flagged walk ran through a slight depression, offering an opportunity to construct a shallow vale or rather wide valley, but in the dense shade of the overhanging trees. It occurred to us if the ground were rather closely covered with large, flat stones, something might be accomplished toward holding the moisture in the soil, or at least protecting the roots of small wild flowers in crevices against the encroachment of the hungry maples.

There were no rocks at Breeze Hill. The ground is shale over a dense shale bed, and nothing resembling a real rock



occurs naturally on the place. The stones used in the first little rockery were limestone blocks left over from repairing a wall. They were the common building material of this region called "bluestone," showing marked stratification but almost impossible to cleave with any satisfaction. It seemed best, in attempting to imitate a rocky woodland floor, as we tried to do in Lovers' Lane, to go to some such place in the woods and get the stones, meanwhile observing what plants grew where we found them. A kindly garden friend who heard of our necessity opened her woods to us, so that shortly after the water-garden was finished in the spring of 1928, we loaded a wheelbarrow, crow-bar, picks, and iron rollers in the rear end of the coupé, and taking two husky workmen, drove six miles to the woods and began work. On subsequent days the men brought out a large number of flat limestone rocks, curiously weathered and very attractive. A 5-ton automobile truck brought them to Breeze Hill.

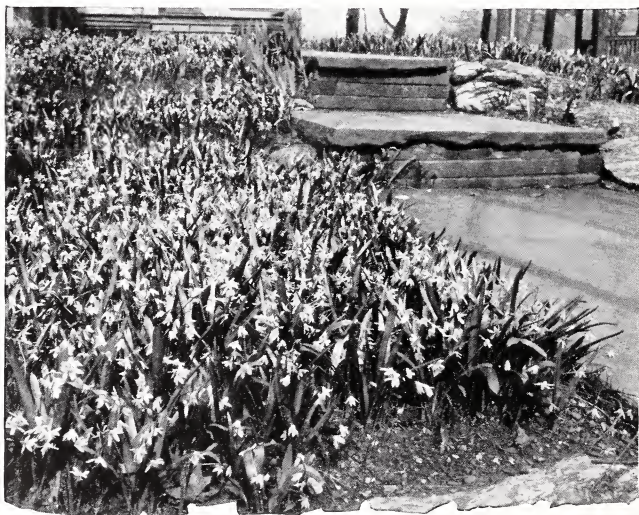
With these stones, an area, twenty feet long and fifteen wide at the broadest place, on one side of the path was practically paved, and, also, a smaller area opposite. The crevices between the rocks and the hollows above them were filled with leaf-mold and peat, and after a few good rains had bedded the rocks in place, a number of woodland plants were set in.

That autumn a windbreak was planted to the north, and special efforts were made to hold the regular fall of autumn leaves in place, as they are held in the woods, by scattering soil and dead branches over them. An inch or so of leaf-mold and peat has been put on every spring since. Only a few patches of stone are now visible, and the wild plants have ample depth of soil to flourish. The natural mulch and the prevention of surface evaporation by the stones have worked a great change. The ground covered by the rocks is almost moist, and shade-loving plants, such as hepatica, anemonella, trillium, podophyllum, *Phlox divaricata*, aqui-

legia, and various ferns and mosses are thriving satisfactorily. So far as the plants go, a proper place has been made for them to live, but the area is still unattractive on account of the straight line and hard edges of the dressed stone walk, and it is probably due for more naturalistic treatment eventually.

### III

The third rock-garden at Breeze Hill was begun in a similar location under the vigorous and hungry American linden tree beside the Axis Walk, which leads from the residence through the Center Garden, around the sun-dial, and to the Hillside Road gate. The steep slope under the linden was descended by flagstone steps, bolstered with bricks, and on either side, up-ended slabs of cement, held back by iron stakes, formed virtual bins from which enor-



The restored Scillas cascade over the Third Rock-Garden



mous quantities of *Scilla sibirica* made a rippling blue waterfall every spring. It seemed sinful in the garden sense, to disturb the scillas, but the temporary nature of the construction gave a good excuse. The cement slabs were removed, the stakes pulled out, the top surface of the ground sliced off, and the scillas sifted out. The slope fell more than 4 feet, at an angle of about 60 degrees. We repeated the treatment used in Lovers' Lane, except that we had learned to allow larger pockets for soil and had the advantage of greater elevation.

This third rockery was intended to assume the appearance of an outcropping rock ledge. We found out later how well we had succeeded when intelligent visitors congratulated us on having a natural ledge on the place!

We have not found many different things to grow well in it as yet. A few baby narcissus, some early wild crocuses, the common ornithogalum of this neighborhood, which is called "Star of Bethlehem," have moderately prospered. A few sedums have done very well, but the best plant in this rockery is the Allegheny bleeding-heart, *Dicentra eximia*. This fine plant carries its beautiful foliage all summer, and in the dense shade its flowers assume a very lovely pale pink color finer than its rather dingy tint in other locations. It blooms all season. *Trillium grandiflorum* has spread valiantly from a small number of roots set out in the fall of 1928. Some snowdrops and a number of assorted epimediums, which are most charming little plants, have been excellent.

Some things have not been so good. Beautiful *Anemone apennina* likes the sunlight better. A collection of calochortus from Carl Purdy, in California, have lived but not bloomed, but in the low ground, along the walk at the foot of the steps, we have had such remarkable success with Purdy's California erythroniums and *Trillium ovatum*, that we have christened the whole section "Little California," hoping that the calochortus eventually will help to justify

the name. In the spring the scillas, which were restored, make a cascade of blue, and hard upon them follow narcissus, trilliums, dicentras, primulas, and erythroniums. Midsummer bloom is scant. A few unhappy geranium species linger, but we have not yet learned just what to grow there. However, the ground is so full of spring bulbs that not much of anything else can be put in.

#### IV

The fourth adventure in rock-gardening was really the result of the construction of the pool and the iris-garden.\* It was necessary to level the ground around the pool, and this required a retaining-wall along two sides of the garden, rising about 4 feet high at the northeast corner, and sloping gently to the east and south. The wall was built of the common bluestone, using undressed blocks of varying sizes as they came from the quarry. A trench 2 feet wide was dug around the edge of the garden, in which was laid the foundation course of heavy blocks. Cracks and spaces between were rammed with soil, and a layer of fine earth spread over them. Upon this the next course was laid, using the earth for packing instead of mortar. Each course of stones was set in a little and tilted backward, so that the thickness of the wall decreased about 3 inches for every foot of height, finishing off with a top layer of flat stones about 1 foot wide.†

Where the main walk rose above the wall, three steps were made with sawed brown sandstone, leaving a 6-inch planting-space behind each tread. Low plants set in these spaces masked the incongruity of wall and step materials, which was considered less important than the planting effect. At the angle where the two walls meet, four steps, arranged in a quarter-circle, were built of the same materials. In

\*For an account of this venture, see *Breeze Hill News*, Vol. I, No. 5, August, 1930.

†The Boss here breaks in to declare that each stone in these walls was "personally conducted" by Mr. Stevens. No mason would ever care or dare to build a "dry wall" so capably.

these steps, for the past two years, viola Jersey Gem has bloomed beautifully and abundantly, attracting much admiring attention. The early show of forget-me-nots in the main steps has been equally effective.

The crevices of the wall are all planted. A small clump of *Aquilegia canadensis* gives brilliant color early in spring, followed by a few aubrietias which hang beautifully from the rocks. Two or three clumps of *Alyssum saxatile* make a golden interlude. Some selected tufts of *Phlox subulata*—a clear pink, a light lilac, and a pure white—are very charming, but have to be kept cut back pretty severely. Various forms of dianthus crown the top stones, while below are a half-dozen helianthemums which make the gray walls gay with their brightly colored, silken blossoms. A clump or two of *Anemone apennina* display in the sun their starry blue eyes before a few light yellow daffodils. A considerable planting of *Leucojum vernum* sparkles at the top of the wall in one place. Over one corner of the steps, gray-leaved *Nepeta Mussini* covers itself with misty blue flowers, while, in its season, the silvery *Cerastium tomentosum* riots along the top and hangs in graceful festoons. *Cerastium* has to be clipped back severely to prevent it from overrunning everything. A few plants of *Cotoneaster horizontalis* lay their enamel-like branches flat against the wall at various diverting angles, and their bright berries glitter far into the autumn. These plants, of course, will have to be removed sooner or later. Eventually they will grow much too big for the low wall.

Along the base, early tulips and snowdrops are gay in spring, and a few Munstead polyanthus make superb clumps in the angles. *Veronica rupestris* and *Thymus Serpyllum lanuginosus* are freely used in cracks and crevices where larger things cannot be accommodated, and in the higher places of the wall, *Campanula carpatica* White Star makes beautiful tussocks of foliage early in the season, followed by gay blossoms until late summer. Many other things



The Wall-Garden in June

have been tried in these walls in the past two years. Saxifrages and alpine primulas have not been very successful, and all violas, except Jersey Gem and the common little "Johnny-jump-up" (an amiable sort of weed at Breeze Hill), perish quickly after the first blossoming season. In the beds at the top of the wall, clumps of choice narcissus are followed by annuals such as *Torenia Fournieri*, *Phlox Drummondii*, *Saponaria calabrica*, and so on. Fuchsias find a place here, too, and at the top of the circular steps two clumps of *Anemone japonica* flank the opening through the hedge and make a spectacular autumnal show against the arborvitæ background. Nearby, in a very sheltered place,

is our hopeful plant of *Romneya Coulteri* which has yet to face the rigors of a Breeze Hill winter.

At the foot of the longer wall a vivid royal blue ribbon lasts for many weeks. It is made by a selected *Lobelia Erinus* (originally grown from Sutton's Dark Blue), using cuttings instead of seedlings. We get one shade only, uniform compactness, and fine bronze foliage. More questions are asked about this living blue ribbon than about anything else in the garden.

That section of the wall between the iris- and peony-gardens is crowned with various pyracanthas, charming, glossy-leaved shrubs which are fast making a dense hedge, and perhaps becoming much too large. At any rate, we intended this space for a box or holly hedge, and, while the pyracanthas are a fair present substitute, box or holly will have to come eventually.

It will be noticed that nothing very rare or unusual has been tried in this garden. We are not rock-garden specialists at Breeze Hill, but we have had a great amount of pleasure in watching the development of quite ordinary plants when given a chance to grow in the rocky surroundings which they enjoy. *Cerastium*, formerly used for edging perennial beds, was always a miserable thing, dying out in the middle in summer, wandering off into the grass-paths, and coming up in places where it was not wanted. At the top of a wall it remains compact, although exuberant, does not die out so distressingly in the center, and keeps its charming silvery color all season. *Phlox subulata* seems to have changed its habit, for it has become more compact and tidy than when allowed to ramble on an unrestricted slope. The only subjects which have not flourished as they should are helianthemums, and we suspect that the plants were too large when we tried to put them into the wall and have not yet recovered from the shock.

The chief regret is that the wall is not longer and higher—especially higher. It is much too low for vigorous plants of

*Campanula rotundifolia*, which rise nearly three feet when blooming and obscure the whole construction.

Along the top edge of the wall this year flourished a charming plant raised from seed obtained from Europe, called *Hypericum polyphyllum*, which does not agree at all with Farrer's description but fits exactly all that he says about *Hypericum reptans*; so, perhaps, we may credit our European seedsman with a lucky error. It makes enormous, prostrate rosettes bespangled with brilliant 2-inch yellow flowers, with the flossy mass of golden yellow stamens in the center characteristic of the hypericum tribe. *Arabis procurrents*, a very graceful and charming thing, runs in the crevices and is much prettier than the coarse, overfed-looking *Arabis alpina*. *Iris cristata* clusters along the top of one section; *Anemone Pulsatilla* in another. *Arenaria montana* glitters in a wide crevice. A few saxifrages of the rosette type, raised from seed labeled *Saxifraga azoides*, but which in our ignorance we doubt; a mossy arenaria, probably *A. cæspitosa*; a charming Jacob's ladder (*Polemonium reptans*), have places; and a clump of *Tulipa Kaufmanniana*, which we vainly tried to remove when constructing the wall, eluded us because of the great depth to which it had sunk its bulbs and grows bigger every year.

In the back reaches of the bed, at the top of the wall, are *Campanula persicifolia*, *Salvia azurea Pitcheri*, *Achillea filipendulina*, *Lilium regale*, *Lilium speciosum*, *Baptisia australis*, *Platycodon grandiflorum*, and various asters, all overhung by the fine old arborvitæ hedge which is one of the features of the place.

The plants we have mentioned are only a portion of the things which grow and which, no doubt, will be accommodated there in the future. In no section of the garden is there more variety and greater continuity of interest than in this little vertical strip which does not occupy a space larger than four by eighty feet.

(Accounts of the other Rock Garden Adventures will appear in subsequent issues of Breeze Hill News.)